

Prepare a Way for the Lord

2nd Sunday of Advent. Year C. December 6, 2009. (Text: Luke 3:1-6)

Into our ordinary round of life – work, play, family time, religion – into the routine of our existence, there sometimes comes an unexpected experience. It could be a crisis, like a car accident, or it could be simply a moment of sudden “revelation” that opens our eyes, startles us, takes us *out* of ourselves and our comfort zones and *into* an encounter with the Ultimate —an encounter with God. ...God who is suddenly *right here* – not comfortably remote in some holy, theological “heaven” – but right *HERE*, right *NOW*, looking us in the eye, addressing Godself to us. And we’re halted dead in our tracks.

When this kind of encounter happens, everything we’ve been doing, everything that once seemed so important, no longer matters. In fact, it all just falls away in that dazzling moment when we apprehend the presence of God. Sometimes this moment forces us to see ourselves as we have never been able to see ourselves before. Sometimes it completely re-directs the course of our lives. Sometimes it changes us. Sometimes. For some people.

For others, the moment of divine encounter comes, and they feel shaken. Startled for a time. They say to themselves, “Wow! What was that?” But then the force of habit takes over again, and they slip back into the old routines. And in the end nothing is really changed for them.

The man history calls John the Baptist, however, was changed – completely transformed – when the word of God came to him out of the blue as he was praying in the wilderness. And he felt *driven* to go and preach to anybody who would listen and tell them about the holiness and awesome power of the God who demands that his people get themselves ready for a divine encounter.

John was a priest, the son, grandson, and great-grandson, *etc., etc.*, of Jewish priests who stood in the Temple of the Lord when they were assigned to serve and offered animal sacrifices, burned incense, and pronounced blessings in God’s name. It was a routine, but sacred task. John was not a preacher; he was an expert in the Temple rituals and ceremonies prescribed by the Law.

Somehow, though, some time when he was out in the Judean desert, God came to John in a moment of life-changing revelation and said, “John, I have a different work for you to do. Other priests can keep offering the daily sacrifices. You, though, are now to be my prophet. Yes, I know I haven’t sent a prophet for a long time. Not for centuries. But now I’m sending you! Go and call out to my people, my wayward and preoccupied people, and tell them to prepare for me. You see, I’m coming to them. I’m coming soon! And they’re not ready.”

So, as Luke says, John went into the entire region around the Jordan, the swamps and the deserts, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. —As had been written in the words of a much earlier prophet, Isaiah. John was

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.*

*Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;*

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

John was the advance man for Jesus. He was the prophet whose job was to go ahead and “prepare the way” for the Lord to come, personally and with power, into the lives of the people that John had seen all his life, day after day, thronging the courts of the Temple in Jerusalem, changing their money at the tables of the money changers and buying lambs or doves from the sellers of sacrificial animals. People who were accustomed to “religion as usual” and “business as usual.” John had played a role in “religion as usual.” But he would do so no longer.

What if the Lord spoke to us this morning? What if the Lord encountered us here as we’re peacefully gathered for a service in Christ Episcopal Church on the Second Sunday of Advent in the year 2009? What if the Voice of God boomed out, interrupting our hymn-singing and preaching and smooth liturgical ceremonies, and said – to all of us as a gathered body of Christians in this place: *“Listen! I want you to get the people of this town ready for Me. I’m coming to them, and they’re not prepared. Prepare a straight path for me to come here. Help people to repent. This is your new work. Get busy! I’ll be back soon.”*

What would we do, what could we do, to prepare a path by which God might visit the people among who we live... and, of course, visit *us* at the same time? Preparing a path means breaking a trail, building a road. It’s about clearing away the obstacles. It’s about smoothing the way.

I remember when the Colorado highway department and a Denver construction company called Centric Jones were building I-70 through Glenwood Canyon. (Do any of you remember that too?) It took a long time. It took a lot of work by a lot of people. Tons of rock had to be blasted out and hauled away in order to “prepare the way” for cars to get through the canyon in large numbers and with ease.

How might we – our small congregation – “prepare the way” for God to come anew into our midst and into a community of people who are not expecting anything surprising to happen? John the Baptist’s technique was to demand that people “repent” and show their sincerity by plunging into the Jordan and washing their bodies with water. To *repent* literally means *“to have a different mind.”* A *changed* mind. To repent means to think a new way —to see with new eyes and hear with new ears.

How could we summon the sophisticated people of our town to *repentance*? Wearing camels’ hides and rope belts and eating a diet of locusts and wild honey, as John the Baptist did, probably would only mark us as extremely odd: a new religious cult. We’d get attention, but it would be the wrong kind of attention. People would assume we’d *lost* our minds, not changed them.

But there IS a way to invite the world around us to repentance, to a new way of thinking. If we can be seen to have made conscious decisions of our own, if we can be seen to have made an active choice to break with old ways of being and behaving, the people around us will notice. After all, we’re not living as recluses; we’re living as part of a larger society. We’re players in the game of life here, not bystanders. If we take a different path, the people among whom we live will see that there *is* a different path. If we invite them to walk that different path with us, then some of them will.

The repentance which God might, and which in fact God IS summoning us to proclaim to the community around us, is a radical re-direction of our common life, the kind of re-direction that can only grow out of a decision to live by a different set of values from the ones that used to guide us. This repentance is

nothing less than an overthrowing of our idols and a return to reverence for and submission to the will of the One God, whose Son came into the midst of His people, once John had prepared the path for him.

For us, in our time and place, preparing a path for the Lord might mean changing the focus of our thinking from the quest for a “better lifestyle” and more material goodies to the quest for a tangible, visible relationship with God that becomes the central reality of our existence.

It might mean changing our scope of personal concern so that we deliberately and thoughtfully embrace the poor and marginalized people we see around us in this Valley, rather than limiting our compassion to those in our circle of friends or church or family. It might mean giving totally different kinds of gifts this Christmas. (Or, if we have already done our Christmas shopping for this year, it might mean planning a very different shopping list in 2010!)

It might mean changing how we understand self-discipline, retraining our appetites so that we hunger and thirst for holiness more than for the good food and drink which are so abundant in our homes this time of year.

It might mean changing how we practice our faith, “going public” with it in a confident but not pushy way, making clear that, for us: God is love, Jesus is Lord, and all people are our sisters and brothers.

Preparing a way for the Lord means altering old habits that have always walled God out of our lives. God wants to come to us. He’s always trying. But we set up barriers that keep him out.

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and choose to walk in a new path, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.